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G. M. Perry; Patrick McGilligan; Ousmane Sembene

Film Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 3. (Spring, 1973), pp. 36-42.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197321%2926%3A3%3C36%3AOSA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-K>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

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Photo: James Korger

G. M. PERRY
AND
PATRICK MCGILLIGAN

Ousmane Sembene: An Interview

Ousmane Sembene is a slight but sturdy Senegalese, a charming and provocative conversationalist, a committed revolutionary. He is also a Third World film-maker of major force and accomplishment, whose international reputation as Africa's most important director is based remarkably on a total output of only five films, though he was previously well known as a novelist.

As a leading spokesman of sub-Sahara's black artistry, Sembene has travelled the world personally, projecting his films and spreading his basic message of pride and confidence in the heritage and culture of Africa's native peoples.

On such occasions in America and on the Continent, the films of Sembene have been heralded. In Africa, however, these volatile works usually are banned, typically through pressure brought by the French government, which maintains a vigilant watch over its former colonies. Only Sembene's first full-length fea-

ture, *Mandabi*, has been widely distributed outside of Senegal.

The 49-year-old Sembene was born at Ziguinchor in the rural southern region of Senegal, where the action of *Emitai*, his latest film, takes place. Unlike other European-educated African film-makers and writers, Sembene had little formal schooling—only three years of vocational training beyond the primary grades.

Sembene's life paralleled the story of French recruitment of unwilling African natives told in *Emitai*: he fought in the French army during World War II as a forced enlistee. He remained afterward for a time in France, employed as a dockworker and union organizer in Marseilles while training himself to be a writer.

Sembene has published five novels and a collection of short stories, a body of work so impressive as to place him at the forefront of African writers. His most famous novel, *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (translated in America as *God's*

Bits of Wood) documents in semifictional form the historic Dakar-Niger railroad strike of October 1947, a major step toward Senegalese independence from the French. His last novel, *Le Mandat* (1966), was the basis for his celebrated film, *Mandabi*.

Sembene trained briefly in the Soviet Union before turning his talents to film in the early sixties. But to try to detect Russian influence on his work, or indeed any influences, is mostly futile, for Sembene is very much his own creator. He is one of those rare talents who make film production seem an absolutely natural act.

Nevertheless, one might view *Mandabi* as no less than an African *Bicycle Thief*, with the same universal power and appeal. It relates a similar story of a simple, uneducated man in the city (a non-actor, as in the DeSica film) who is reduced to hopelessness in his circular confrontation with the bureaucracy, and brought to despair when stolen from by a younger generation made corrupt by a society which has lost its human values.

Emitai, Sembene's latest work, trades the slightly abstract social consciousness of *Mandabi* for a direct, historically oriented attack on French colonial practices in the African rural areas. In its use of a provincial setting, in its almost surreal treatment of tribal rites, in its absurdly comical caricatures of the fascistic oppressors, and in its utilization of a mass hero, *Emitai* also offers a parallel to Rocha's *Antonio das Mortes*, a film from another neocolonialized country, Brazil.

Sembene toured the United States late in the fall of 1972, in order to raise funds for his next film project. He stopped in Madison, Wisconsin, for a day, exhibited *Emitai*, and spoke at length to student groups at the University. Visibly exhausted from his tour, he nevertheless answered a continuous stream of questions with seemingly endless patience, a task made doubly difficult by the fact that he speaks only halting English. Luckily, the questions were skillfully translated into French for Sembene's benefit, then the answers back again into English by his superb American interpreter, Carrie Moore.

The following interview is an edited version of Ousmane Sembene's day at Madison.

Originally you were a highly successful acclaimed novelist. Why did you make the switch to film-making?

I've just finished another book but I think it is of limited importance. First, 80% of Africans are illiterate. Only 20% of the populace possibly can read it. But further, my books indispose the bourgeoisie, so I am hardly read at home.

My movies have more followers than the political parties and the Catholic and Moslem religions combined. Every night I can fill up a movie theater. The people will come whether they share my ideas or not. I tell you, in Africa, especially in Senegal, even a blind person will go to the cinema and pay for an extra seat for a young person to sit and explain the film to him. He will feel what's going on.

Personally, I prefer to read because I learned from reading. But I think that cinema is culturally much more important, and for us in Africa it is an absolute necessity. There is one thing you can't take away from the African masses and that is having *seen* something.

But are the films by native black Africans being seen at home?

In West Africa, distribution remains in the hands of two French companies that have been there since colonial times. Because of the active push of our native film-makers, such as our group in Senegal, they are forced to distribute our films, though they do so very slowly. Of the twenty films we have made in Senegal, five have been distributed. It is a continuous fight, for we don't think we can resolve the problems of cinema independent of the other problems of African society.

Neocolonialism is passed on culturally, through the cinema. And that's why African cinema is being controlled from Paris, London, Lisbon, Rome, and even America. And that's why we see almost exclusively the worst French, American, and Italian films. Cinema from the beginning has worked to destroy the native Afri-

can culture and the myths of our heroes. A lot of films have been made about Africa, but they are stories of European and American invaders with Africa serving as a decor. Instead of being taught our ancestry, the only thing we know is Tarzan. And when we do look on our past, there are many among us who are not flattered, who perceive Africa with a certain alienation learned from the cinema. Movies have infused a European style of walking, a European style of doing. Even African gangsters are inspired by the cinema.

African society is in a state of degeneracy, reflected also in our imitative art. But fortunately, unknown even to many Africans themselves, African art has continued, even as the black bourgeoisie had aped European and American models. In African cities is produced what we call "airport art," whittled wood that has been blackened; true art remains in the villages and rural communities, preserved in the ceremony and religion. It is from believing in this communal art that we can be saved from the internal destruction.

What are the particular circumstances in making films in Senegal?

We produce films in a country where there is only one political party, that of Senghor. If you are not within the party, you are against it. Thus we have lots of problems, and they will continue while Senghor is in control. For instance, his government has just vetoed distribution of the film of a young director, the story of a black American who discovers Senegal. The film began with *cinéma vérité* style, but soon became oriented and plotted out to focus on our problems, as it should be. When the government saw the change, it vetoed the film.

We are approximately twenty film-makers in Senegal. Last year we made four long films. They were of unequal value, but we produced them through our own means.

Financing is our most complex problem. We go all over the world giving talks, carrying our machines and tape recorders, projecting our movies, trying to find distribution. When we secure a little bit of money and have paid our

debts, we can begin a new film. The sources of the money vary. You can find a very small group of people who have money which they might lend you in exchange for participating in the filming. Perhaps you can locate a friend who has credit at the bank. But most of us make only one film every two years.

The editing of *Emitai* was financed with laboratory credit. But the laboratories that know us are in France, where we have to go for our montage and technical work. That's very expensive. We're not against France, but we'd prefer to stay at home. *Emitai* was shot on money I received on a commission from an American church for making a film called *Tauw*. We do not refuse any money, even from a church.

Our films are shot in 35mm for the city theaters, then presented in 16mm in the rural areas where there is no 35mm. It is difficult to find 16mm projectors in the cities, a problem created intentionally by those in charge of distribution. We began by making our films in 16mm—much more economical. But the distributors would refuse to project the films in the cities because of the 16mm, so we had to adapt ourselves to their game.

On paper, we could have our own distribution company. But we think that isn't the solution. Why create a parallel market, spend a lot of money, then be beaten down? What exists already should be nationalized.

Are your films distributed throughout Africa?

The only film I've made that has been shown all through Africa is *Mandabi*, because every other country claims that what happens in the movie occurs only in Senegal. And I say it isn't true. *Emitai* has been banned everywhere in Africa except in Senegal, where it was allowed only after a year of protests.

We tried to show *Emitai* in Guadeloupe, but the ambassador from France interceded. The film had one night of exhibition in Upper Volta but never again. When I was invited by the government and students of the Ivory Coast to show it, *Emitai* was first screened the night before by a censor board of eight Africans and two

Frenchmen. The eight were in agreement but the two Frenchmen went to the French ambassador who went to see the head of the government. I was told that it wasn't an "opportune time" to show this film. They were all very polite, so I didn't say anything. I took my film and left.

Has Emitai been seen in France?

Every time I want to show this film, the date falls on "a day of mourning for de Gaulle." De Gaulle dies every day for my film.

Who were the actors in Mandabi?

They weren't professionals. The old man who plays the main role, we found working near the airport. He had never acted before. I had a team of colleagues and together we looked around the city and country for actors. We didn't pay a lot, but we did pay, so it was very painful to choose. There was always the influence of my parents, my friends, and even the mistresses of my friends, and we had to struggle against all of that. You laugh, but I assure you it was very difficult.

Once the police telephoned me and soon this fellow arrived who was their representative. I was a little disturbed. But he had just come to tell us that he had a friend who wanted us to put his mistress in the film. I was forced to accept or else it would have cost me. It is concessions like this one which makes work difficult.

How did you rehearse Mandabi?

We rehearsed for one month in a room very much like this lecture hall. *Mandabi* was the first film completely in the Senegalese language and I wanted the actors to speak the language accurately. There was no text, so the actors had to know what they were going to say, and say it at the right moment. Cinema is very arbitrary, yet there is a limited time and during it the actors must state what needs to be stated. People often reproach Senegalese film-makers for slowness, so we must be aware that cinema is not only the image but it is a question of punctuation.

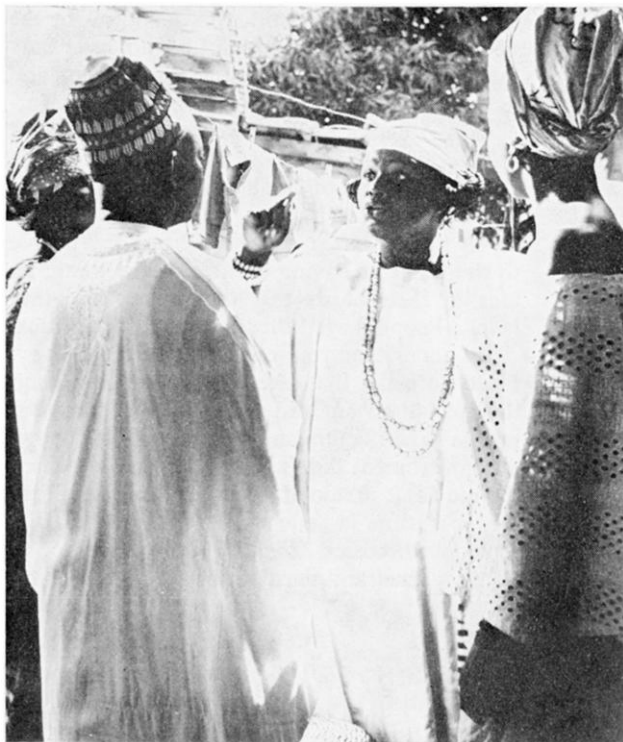
Could you talk about the role of music in Mandabi?

Contrary to what many people around the world think, that Africa only spends its time dancing, our music sometimes has served a sig-

nificantly more important political purpose. During the colonial period, all of the information that was diffused among the people was passed on by music at the large central gathering places, such as the water fountains or wells in the city. The musical refrain was dispersed like a serpent that bites its tail.

I composed the music for *Mandabi*, and tried to make it of maximum importance. After the film was presented in Dakar, people sang the theme song for a while. But the song was "vetoed" from the radio, which belongs to the government and is sacred. (Since the *coup d'etat*, the radio station is guarded even more than the government.) So things changed. All you needed was a new sound and it chased away the old one.

Another factor: we who make films in Senegal are looking for music that is particularly suitable for our type of film. I think it is here where African cinema still suffers certain difficulties. We are undergoing Afro-American music and Cuban music. I'm not saying that's bad, but I would prefer that we would be able to create an African music.



Are you satisfied with your conclusion to Mandabi?

I don't think I really have to like the ending. It's only up to me to give the situation. The ending is linked to the evolution of the Senegalese society, thus it is as ambiguous. As the postman says, either we will have to bring about certain changes or we will remain corrupt. I don't know. Do you like the ending?

What we wonder is this: do you believe it is the duty of the political artist to go beyond presenting a picture of corruption—to offer a vision of the future, of what could be?

The role of the artist is not to say what is good, but to be able to denounce. He must feel the heartbeat of society and be able to create the image society gives to him. He can orient society, he can say it is exaggerating, going overboard, but the power to decide escapes every artist.

I live in a capitalist society and I can't go any further than the people. Those for change are only a handful, a minority, and we don't have that Don Quixote attitude that we can transform society. One work cannot instigate change. I don't think that in history there has been a single revolutionary work that has brought the people to create a revolution. It's not after having read Marx or Lenin that you go out and make a revolution. It's not after reading Marcuse in America. All the works are just a point of reference in history. And that's all. Before the end of an act of creation, society usually has already surpassed it.

All that an artist can do is bring the people to the point of having an idea of the thing, an idea in their heads that they share, and that helps. People have killed and died for an idea.

If I understand your criticism, then I'm happy. I had no belief that after people saw *Mandabi*, they would go out and make a revolution. But people liked the film and talked about it, though my government didn't. They wanted to censor the movie at the point where it said that "Honesty is a crime in Senegal."

People discussed *Mandabi* in the post office or in the market and decided they were not going

to pay out their money like the person in my movie. They reported those trying to victimize them, which led to many arrests. But when they denounced the crooks, they would say it was not the person but the government which was corrupt. And they would say they were going to change the country.

I know my own limits. But through nothing more than just supplying these people with ideas, I am participating in their awareness.

Do you find that people in America find similar associations with Mandabi?

Initially, the film was not destined for other people than Africans, but we can see that certain films, whether made in Africa or in America, can give us something and teach us, and that a contact is possible from people to people. There is an old film that I like a lot, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which dates from a moment of crisis in America. But the present-day peasants in Africa are at that level. So, you see there are works that create communication.

Do you find similar communication and inspiration in the cinéma vérité of the Frenchman, Jean Rouch?

Inspired by Rouch? He applied his methods a few years ago to the French problem, but didn't go far and didn't bring a revolution to the French cinema. I think the New Wave of Godard and Truffaut has contributed something. But *cinéma vérité* in the fashion of Rouch is not really *cinéma vérité* nor is it his invention. The methods date from the Russian socialist films of Dziga-Vertov.

Would you comment on your own experiences as a student of film-making in Russia?

I don't talk about my Russian experiences in America just as I didn't talk of my American experiences in Russia. Every country has its methods and every system of education tries to perpetuate what it represents. Their teaching is socialist or communist just as teaching in America is linked to the establishment. You can take it or leave it. And since I was ignorant, I was forced to take what was given to me, and afterwards I used it as I thought I should.

Why did you make Emitai, "God of Thun-

der," a political film addressed particularly to the peasantry?

In African countries, the peasants are even more exploited than the workers. They see that the workers are favored and earn their pittance each month. Therefore, the element of discontent is much more advanced among the peasants than with the workers. This fact doesn't give the peasantry the conscience of revolutionaries, but it can lead to movements of revolt which bear positive results.

There are many peasants who live fragmented in a closed economy, producing enough to eat without commercial relationship to the government. But there are other peasants involved in commercial activities who are beginning to understand economic exchange. Last year there were rumors of discontent among the peasants. To tear apart this discontent, Senghor distributed three billion francs to the peasants. You see, you can have hope in the peasant, but you can't base your revolutionary movement around them. But we're not discouraged. The peasantry is a force on which we can depend.

What is the historical background of Emitai?

I came myself from this rural region and these true events of the Diolla people inspired me to present an image of French conduct in my home territory during my early manhood. During the last World War, those of my age, 18, were forced to join the French army. Without knowing why, we were hired for the liberation of Europe. Then when we returned home, the colonialists began to kill us, whether we were in Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Algeria, or Madagascar. Those of us who had returned from the French war involvement in Vietnam in 1946 came back to struggle against the French. We were not the same as the black soldiers at home from French-speaking Africa who participated in colonialism instead of demonstrating against it. Now, 10 years after independence, it is these same ex-soldiers who are bringing about *coups d'etat*.

Aren't the women the true heroes of Emitai, as they also were in your revolutionary novel, called in America God's Bits of Wood?

As *Emitai* shows, when the French wanted

our rice, the women refused but the men accepted the orders. Women have played a very important part in our history. They have been guardians of our traditions and culture even when certain of the men were alienated during the colonial period. The little that we do know of our history we owe to our women, our grandmothers.

The African women are more liberated than elsewhere. In certain African countries, it is the women who control the market economy. There are villages where all authority rests with the women. And whether African men like it or not, they can't do anything without the women's consent, whether it be marriage, divorce, or baptism.

What were the circumstances in filming Emitai?

The Diollas are a small minority with a native language about to disappear. For two years, I learned and practiced it. Then I set out to make contact with the Chief of the Sacred Forest. In order to be able to speak to him, I needed to bring a gift offering. He preferred alcohol but I myself drank it up along the way. When I arrived and was hungry, the chief ate without inviting me. That hurt me. Afterwards he said, "You know well that to speak to the king you have to bring something. Since you didn't bring anything, I couldn't invite you."

The people in the movie are not actors, but people from the village. I had a limited time to tell my story, so I couldn't permit them to do only what they wanted. We would rehearse beginning fifteen minutes before the filming, but all the movements were free. I brought red bonnets for the young people to wear who played soldiers. They refused at first because such bonnets are reserved for the chief.

The chief is not chief by birth, incidentally, but initiated after receiving an education and training. No elected person holds advantage over another. There have been moments when the Diollas elected leaders who then left during the night. That's the reality.

Were you aware of evolving in your choice of a hero from the individual in Mandabi to the collective hero of Emitai?

I'm not the one who's evolving. It's the subject which imposes the movement. This story happened to be a collective story. I wanted to show action of a well-disciplined ethnic group in which everyone saw himself only as an integral part of the whole.

Have the Diolla people seen the film?

Before premiering the film for the Senegalese government, I went back to the village to project it. I remained three nights. All of the villagers from the whole area came and, because they have no cinema, their reaction was that of children looking at themselves in a mirror for the first time. After the first showing, the old men withdrew into the sacred forest to discuss the film. When I wanted to leave, they said, "Wait until tomorrow." They came back the second evening, then returned to the rain forest.

The third evening there was a debate. The old men were happy to hear that there was a beautiful language for them, but they weren't happy with the presentation of the gods. Though these forces obviously did not manifest themselves when the French arrived, the gods still were sacred and helped the old men maintain authority.

The young people accused the old of cowardice for not resisting at the end of the war. The women, of course, agreed, but were very proud of their own role.

And the reaction in the cities?

Many asked me why I wanted to make a film about the Diollas. You have to know that the majority of maids in Senegal are Diollas to give you an idea of the superiority felt by others in relation to them. (The African bourgeois have two or three maids. It's not very expensive.) To see *Emitai*, the maids left the children. They invited each other from neighborhood to neighborhood to see the film. Finally, the majority Ouloofs went to see the film and realized that the history of Senegal and of the resistance was not just the history of the majority of Ouloofs. The Diollas are a part of Senegal. And so are the other ethnic groups. And when the Senegalese government finally decreed that they were going to teach Ouloof, they were in a hurry to add Diolla. I don't know if that is because of the film, but that's what happened.

Your films obviously are influential political instruments in Senegal. Could films made in the United States have the same effect?

Alone, no. With the people, yes. There are those who stay secluded and say that artists are creating important works and everything is going to change. Nothing will change. You can put all the revolutionary works on the television, but if you don't go down into the streets, nothing will change. That is my opinion.

LYLE PEARSON

Four Years of African Film

I have seen in Persia a film which doesn't exist and which was called The Life of Charlie.
—André Malraux, *Esquisse d'une Psychologie du Cinéma*, 1946

I haven't been to Persia, which doesn't exist anymore. But there is an annual festival of films

in Iran—there are in fact festivals now sprinkled over the Near East and the northern half of Africa, in Damascus, in Ouagadougou, and sometimes in Rabat. The Dinar, France, francophone film festival has just cut itself loose and from now on will take place every other year in a Third World country—and the Federation